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### Understanding physical education teachers' day-to-day practice

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## **Chapter Ten:**

### **Understanding physical education teachers' day-to-day practice: Challenging the 'unfair' picture.**

Paul McMillan

#### **Abstract**

The physical education literature routinely reports that teachers' practices are over-reliant on forms of 'direct' teaching. However, this chapter argues that these accounts present an unfair picture of the practices of many teachers. This chapter reports on findings from a qualitative research study with six teachers which attempted to present a 'fresh' interpretation of physical education practices in secondary schools. Analysis of observation and interview data confirmed that while direct teaching was evident there were also instances of teacher-guided practice, learner-led practice, teacher-learner negotiated practice, and learner-initiated practice. Given there was a degree of variation in all the teachers' practices, this empirical evidence contrasts markedly with many strands of physical education research.

#### **Introduction**

The main thrust of this present book and other recently published collections (see Ennis, 2016), is with the 'transformative' potential of physical education. Despite the challenges of defining transformative learning and teaching in physical education (Ovens, 2016; Tinning, 2016), it is difficult to argue that the theorising resulting from this perspective has not advanced the subject in many ways (see the Introduction by Thorburn, this volume).

Generally, this transformative agenda has progressively brought 'critical' lenses to the subject with the intention of uncovering how inequalities and injustices come to operate in specific physical education contexts and to stimulate awareness of how to promote emancipation and change. I see the merit in this transformative agenda and also recognise there is further empirical research required in physical education in order to provide some concrete guidance on how to transform the status quo and promote a more equitable and democratic society (Fernandez-Balboa, 2015).

While there is much research still to be done to sketch out what transformative pedagogies might look like in practice (Fernandez-Balboa, 2015; Ovens, 2016; Tinning, 2016), this challenge will *not* be taken up in the present chapter. Instead, due to a string of limitations within the existing research literature, I argue that we have yet to capture a sufficiently

detailed picture of teachers' day-to-day practice in physical education let alone interrogating these practices to instigate emancipation and change. I contend that the limitations within the existing research literature have skewed our conceptions of teachers' practice in schools. Accordingly, there is a need for research studies to start from scratch to (re)build a conceptualisation of teachers' practices from a bottom-up perspective.

The chapter begins by presenting a brief overview of the literature reporting physical education teachers' actions in schools. After acknowledging a number of studies reporting teachers' practices as over-reliant on forms of 'direct' teaching, an examination of three key research traditions is provided to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary research has never really managed to capture 'real-world' teaching (Rovegno, 2009). Thereafter, the chapter sets out the methodological stance for a study that looked to avoid the problems and pitfalls identified in the majority of the research literature. It reports two main findings following qualitative observation and teacher interviews: firstly, that teachers' construal of teacher-learner relationships as 'reciprocal' in nature provided latitude to interact with the learners in their classes in a variety of ways; secondly, the variation displayed in the practices of these teachers enabled five framing categories to be constructed as they represent the patterns of interaction identified in the study. These were teacher-directed, teacher-guided, learner-led, teacher-learner negotiated, and learner-initiated practice. Given the range of teaching approaches captured by this study and the 'mismatch' with the accounts of teachers' practices reported in the literature, a closing 'future directions' section raises a number of implications for researchers, teacher educators, and student teachers.

## **Main Findings**

### **Physical education teachers' practices: what do we know?**

Reviewing the physical education literature reveals teachers' practices across the Anglophone world are consistently reported as over-reliant on forms of 'direct' teaching. For example,

large-scale international comparison surveys (Hardman & Marshall, 2005; Pühse & Gerber, 2005) suggest teachers themselves remain in control of the events that take place in physical education classes. Additionally, large-scale studies researching the styles of teaching favoured by participants (Curtner-Smith et al., 2001; Kulinna & Cothran, 2003; Sympas et al., 2016) discovered that teachers prefer to take control of the decisions in regards to what happens before, during, and after the teaching episodes that comprise lessons. Concerns regarding the prevalence of ‘direct’ teaching have intensified in recent years as the possibility of, and expectations for, physical education lessons to address a wider range of learning experiences have emerged across the Anglophone world (Bailey et al., 2009). Thus, alongside supporting the skills and abilities associated with physical development, lessons should contribute to the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. While physical education is capable of pursuing a wide range of educational outcomes, the likelihood of achieving these broad learning experiences through forms of direct teaching is scant (Kirk, 2013).

Shifting to include a broader repertoire of teaching approaches in physical education lessons has been a perennial challenge for the profession (Kirk, 2010; Tinning, 2010). While there are a number of possible options for reorienting practice – see, for example, Mosston and Ashworth’s (2002) 11 ‘styles’ of teaching and Metzler’s (2011) 8 instructional ‘models’ – scholars contend that physical education teachers rarely move away from ‘direct’ teaching with much criticism being levied against their professional capabilities (Kirk, 2010; Tinning, 2010). Recognising the enduring trend of ‘direct’ teaching in physical education, and the contemporary demands of addressing a wider range of learning experiences, Kirk (2010) warns of the challenges ahead for the profession. He foresees the subject becoming ‘extinct’ in the near future with ‘radical change’ as the only pathway to secure the ‘survival’ of physical education (Kirk, 2010). While open to the possibility of changing current practice, I am left wondering whether the claims about ‘direct’ teaching dominating the profession are

robust enough for us to uncritically instigate *radical* change. For instance, are these claims a fair representation of physical education teachers' day-to-day practices? Are all teachers across the Anglophone world interacting with learners in a direct way? Might there be teachers with broad teaching repertoires that have not been captured and reported in the literature? The following paragraphs retain this sceptical stance and consider how research traditions and methods may have shaped our conceptions of 'teaching' in physical education.

### **Scrutinising physical education research methods**

Interest in the empirical investigation of physical education teachers' practices has been a burgeoning area in the research literature over the past 60 years. In fact, Macdonald et al. (2002) identify several distinctly different theoretical perspectives explicitly informing research investigating physical education teachers' practice. However, as this section will demonstrate, not all theoretical perspectives carry an equal weighting in the physical education literature (Tinning, 2010). This section presents three chronologically-informed reviews of how developments of teachers' day-to-day practices in school settings have been distorted by the research literature.

#### ***Historical marker one: the rise of 'scientific tales' from the 1970s and 1980s***

Macdonald et al. (2002) and Lee (2003) note that positivistic notions from the natural sciences informed much of the early research investigating physical education teachers' practice. Guided by the assumptions of the process-product model (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974), where researchers set out to measure objectively and establish causality between two or more research variables, one prominent stream of research was the systematic investigation of 'The Spectrum of Teaching Styles' (Mosston, 1966). This teaching styles research agenda emerged during the 1970s and *continues* to thrive in contemporary times (Goldberger, Ashworth & Byra, 2012).

While there was interest in researching various teaching methods prior to the arrival of Mosston's (1966) teaching styles, his work added a conceptual framework for process-product researchers to study systematically the teaching of physical education (Rovengo, 2009). However, Rovengo (2009) recognises a fundamental flaw in the research design of many teaching styles studies as the research protocols often demanded just *one* style to be operationalised in a unit of work to verify that the findings of a given study can be attributed to the particular style under investigation. Crucially, the 'mobility ability' potential of Mosston and Ashworth's (2002) later revisions of the spectrum, which encourages teachers to shift rapidly within and between different styles of teaching to more accurately reflect the realities of class settings, has been largely overlooked by researchers. Therefore, due to the incumbent demands of research methodology, scholars have constructed linear and straightforward interpretations in the literature by suggesting teachers only deploy one style of teaching across a lesson or series of lessons (Rovengo, 2009).

Despite a limitation with the extent to which this research reflects the realities of teaching in physical education, these studies continue to heavily influence the profession. For example, Tinning (2010) underscores the influence of this body of work:

Most PE teachers learn about Mosston's Spectrum of Teaching Styles in their undergraduate teacher education and his framework...has had a central role in shaping the way in which many PE teachers think about their teaching activities (p. 43).

In the light of Tinning's comments about the ubiquitous nature of Mosston's work, it can be challenging to discuss teaching in physical education without defaulting to the terminology and research findings associated with this framework. While the teaching styles research community has made helpful contributions to existing understanding, it appears that most of

what we know about teaching in physical education classes through these studies has become crystalized over time and very difficult to challenge (Tinning, 2010).

***Historical marker two: a broader research focus from the mid-1980s***

Physical education research broadened in focus from the mid-1980s onwards (Lee, 2003; Macdonald, 2002; Pope, 2006). Pope (2006) claims that there was unease in the early-1980s relating to the ‘restrictive nature’ of research investigating teachers’ practice. A number of alternative research agendas started to emerge that generally, but not exclusively, used qualitative research methods to capture interpretations of teachers’ practices. Of particular interest for the present chapter are the studies that started to document teacher *and* learner behaviour in the classroom. The most relevant development were the studies inspired by Walter Doyle’s original ‘classroom ecology’ model to investigate teacher-learner(s) interaction and the immediate constraints of the classroom environment. This research started to re-conceptualise life in physical education classes by re-casting teacher-learner behaviour as a more negotiated and unpredictable process (Hastie, 2009).

Despite the developments in classroom ecology, studies from the mid-1980s were largely framed by what Lee (2003) refers to as the ‘wider angle’ lens. In other words, a form of macro-level sociology increasingly informed the physical education research landscape and, accordingly, interests ‘shifted away from [micro] classroom processes’ to include ‘the study of policy...issues of ‘difference’, identity and the body’ (Evans & Davies, 2006, pp. 113-114). Consequently, Hastie (2009) complains that:

...there was a solid and extensive program of research using the classroom ecology model...now fast forward...to 2007 only eight papers [in prominent physical education journals]...identified observation [in classes]...as...critical (p. 156).

The comments of Hastie (2009) suggest there has been a progressive ‘disappearance’ of observation research reporting scenes from physical education classes in their present day form.

***Historical marker three: the 1990s onwards and the pre-occupation with ‘what’s broken’***

Physical education research from the early-mid-1990s, while still broadening in scope, increasingly turned to interrogate the inequalities and injustices inherent within physical education (Macdonald et al., 2002). As I highlighted earlier, it is difficult to argue that these ‘critical’ perspectives have not advanced physical education in many ways. For instance, who would argue against research agendas based on fairness and equity? Well, Tinning (2002), one of the earliest physical education scholars identifying himself as being ‘within the critical pedagogy big tent’ (p. 224), argued for more ‘modest’ interpretations of this theoretical perspective. Tinning’s (2002) view was that the language used by these scholars was overly forceful in describing the limitations of current practices and their visions for change were not always corroborated with empirical evidence.

More recently, in reviewing the findings of studies using a ‘critical’ lens to investigate physical education settings, Enright et al. (2014) observed that what is shared across this research is a ‘preoccupation with failure’. In other words, rather than broadening our conceptions of teaching, there is a strong move to inform us of ‘what’s broken’ (Enright et al., 2014). The concluding comments of Enright et al. (2014), in the same vein as Tinning (2002), encapsulate the impact of such a deficit-based perspective:

...an unintended consequence of deficit thinking is that sometimes we end up seeking problems even where strengths are shouting at us...to insist only on these sorts of stories is to flatten our experience and to overlook the many other stories that form our field (p. 11).



This quotation illuminates how contemporary research agendas may have inadvertently obscured our conceptions of teachers' practice in physical education classes. These studies use sophisticated theoretical ideas to bring negative constraints into view, but in attempting to make the case for emancipation and change, there is a tendency to overemphasise these constraints as part of the critique (Enright et al., 2014; Tinning, 2002). While there will always be scope to improve and change physical education teachers' practices, the question remains whether people are repressed (and if current practices are as repressive) to the extent suggested by these 'critical' scholars.

In summary, the scrutiny of research traditions and methods in preceding paragraphs has revealed the ways in which key research developments have shaped contemporary thinking about physical education teachers' practice. It has shown how: teaching styles research studies employing a process-product design stripped the detail out of classroom life, but these continue to dominate present day thinking and practice (Tinning, 2010); the broadening of research interests from the mid-1980s led to a progressive 'disappearance' of observation research documenting events in classes (Hastie, 2009); and the pre-occupation from the mid-1990s with 'what's broken' has obscured more 'appreciative' tales about physical education from surfacing (Enright et al., 2014).

Drawing these three 'markers' together and considering their collective impact, suggests there are profound issues for the physical education profession. In line with Rovegno (2009), there is a danger our contemporary 'conceptions of teaching have been largely determined by university scholars' (p. 53); this is due partly to the demands of research methodologies and partly to their allegiances to certain theoretical perspectives. Given the concerns raised in this section, it appears that the contemporary research literature no longer paints a faithful portrait

of teachers' practices. It is time for 'fresh' interpretations to emerge. Accordingly, I present an overview of a research study that investigated this 'flawed' picture of teachers' practices.

## **Challenging the 'unfair' picture**

### ***Background***

My research took up the challenge of capturing a 'fresh' interpretation of teachers' practices. It was inspired by Rovegno's (2009) call for more 'naturalistic' research to be conducted in physical education as few studies have adopted this perspective. This naturalistic account, where researchers use qualitative methods to document the practices that teachers themselves initiate and sustain in their school contexts, appeared to be a valuable way to review current conceptions of teaching in the physical education literature. It involved documenting teachers' thinking and actions in their daily working lives without relying on a highly restrictive, experimental research methodology or advancing a pre-existing theoretical agenda for how things 'ought to be'. Importantly, adopting a naturalistic stance presents a restricted account of the empirical world, but it is restricted in quite different ways from much of the existing research conducted in physical education (Rovegno, 2009).

### ***Research design***

The study tracked six teachers working in different secondary school contexts across Scotland. A pilot study and conversations with a number of key informants were crucial to ensure that the participants chosen were suited to the demands of the study. A key concern in sampling was the recruitment of highly competent practitioners. There were two main advantages in selecting highly competent teachers. Firstly, this approach to sampling minimised the possibility for differences in professional capabilities being a confounding influence on the different interactions performed by these teachers. Secondly, highly competent teachers could enhance the credibility of the findings and increase the overall potential for the study to impact physical education teachers' practices. A further, related, but

equally important, concern in sampling was the desire to recruit teachers who individually displayed features in their practice that were distinct from those of other participants.

Including diversity in the patterns of interaction across the sample was important so research observations could document a broad range of practices taking place in physical education.

Two main research methods were used to gather data: observations of lessons in schools and semi-structured interviews with teachers. These methods were employed during two distinct phases of the research study: the first phase involved visiting classrooms on 88 occasions to observe teachers in action, and, the second phase, involved interviewing each teacher on one occasion after all observations were complete. The observation work provided a fine-grained account of teachers' actions in classrooms together with insights into how various purposes and contextual influences shape their practices. The interviews provided an opportunity to explore insights from the observation work with these teachers in an interactive fashion and incorporate their views into the research findings.

### ***Mapping teacher-learner relationships***

In observations of, and interview discussion with, teachers about their practice, they all specifically mentioned the need to develop 'relationships' with the learners in their classes. Indeed, relationships appeared to be a key driver for the many decisions that teachers made about their practice. In the following interview exchange with a teacher (Gaynor), she confirmed the link between the relationships she has with learners and the 'conscious decision[s]' she makes about her classroom practice:

**Paul:** I've seen quite a lot of variation in the way that you're able to work with different groups of people, but would you say that's about right that you've got various ways that you can work quite comfortably?

**Gaynor:** Yeah, definitely, I think I make a conscious decision, based on the relationship I build up with the class. I mean I think the first lesson you came out to see me I'd only been at the school three months and by then I felt like I knew my classes even quite well to understand what the best approaches were for the different classes, and they [the classes] are different.

On Gaynor's account, it appears that teacher-learner relationships played a large part in deciding the 'best approaches...for the different classes' that were observed during this study. Indeed, all participants taking part identified a connection between these relationships and the ways in which they employed various teaching approaches.

Having established a link between teacher-learner relations and practice, interviews pursued the main factors that the teachers represented as informing these relationships. At the heart of a cluster of ideas associated with these teacher-learner relationships were 'respect', 'time', 'familiarity', and 'context'. Given the emphasis placed on documenting the varied nature of practice, 'respect' will be emphasised most in this chapter as the teachers recognised this factor as central to the deployment of a broad teaching repertoire<sup>1</sup>.

***Respect and relationships: generating scope for a broad range of teacher-learner interactions***

In the next quotation, note how a teacher (Erika), in discussing relationships in her interview, encapsulates the value of respect very clearly:

**Paul:** You mentioned about a relationship there. What do you mean by that? What does that involve?

**Erika:** Well, I think when you first meet your class I think you need to be quite firm with them and they need to know what the boundaries are, and they need to know that

you are like a human being as well, and you [the teacher] need to be respectful towards them [the learners].

These comments connect the idea of respect to the ways in which people are treated in classes. The essence of respect, according to the six teachers, appeared to involve being mindful of the rights, worth, and feelings of *all* people in the classroom: the teacher and the learners. In other words, while these teachers appeared to demand respect *from* the learners, evidence suggests they also showed a genuine regard and respect *for* the learners.

Comments made by teachers during their interviews also indicated how these relationships, founded upon a respect *for* the learners' rights, created conditions for the learners themselves to contribute meaningfully to the events that took place in classes. For example, the following comments by Gaynor support a view that these relationships were reciprocal in nature and provided the capacity for *interactive* exchanges to take place between the teacher and learners:

**Gaynor:** If I didn't have that relationship, if it was a strictly, I'm a teacher, you're my learners, you'll do what I say, I don't think I would have had that...I'm going to use a big word here...reciprocity!

**Paul:** It's not just teacher and learner but there's a two-way sort of exchange almost. Is that what you're saying, is it?

**Gaynor:** Yeah, and I thought it was quite a mature level for them [the learners] to be on.

Gaynor's preceding comments suggest that there are situations in classes where the teacher-learner interactions are *reciprocal* in nature and involve much more than 'I'm a teacher, you're my learners...do what I say'. The interpretation of respect outlined by all the teachers

depicted an *unequal*, but not wholly asymmetric relationship with the learners in their classes. Therefore, the nature of these relationships appear to offer potential for teacher-learner interactions where with the learners, to a degree at least, have an active role in deciding what takes place in classroom. Having established that these relationships involved a shared or mutual respect, and the scope this offers for the learners to play a relevant role in deciding what happens and does not happen in classes, the next section will present the patterns of interaction that were captured during my observation work.

### ***Tracking teacher-learner interaction***

Close analysis revealed the *different* ways in which the teachers interacted with learners during their day-to-day practice. For instance, there were moments where the teacher largely controlled situations, other moments where the teacher and learners collectively debated the direction of situations, and still other moments where a learner(s) took control of situations. The following five framing categories were constructed to delineate the variation in these interaction patterns: teacher-directed, teacher-guided, learner-led, teacher-learner negotiated, and learner-initiated practice. These identifiable patterns of teacher-learner interaction *differed* in the degree of control in relation to what was said and done in the classroom. In other words, there is a shift in the degree of control in regards to who takes the initiative – the teacher or the learners – in classes as the categories progress from teacher-directed practice to learner-initiated practice.

### ***Teacher-directed practice: the teacher ‘in charge’***

Working in a teacher-directed way for a section of a lesson was common across observations of all the teachers. Teacher-directed practice generally involved the teacher being explicitly ‘in charge’ in the sense that she or he led a series of acts relating to what, how, when, and where particular actions could happen. The teacher acted to set out the content for a section of a lesson by using a lot of explanation and often accompanying this with a teacher and/or

learner demonstration. For the most part, the whole class or a smaller sub-group of learners listened to the opening explanation(s) from the teacher. Once the opening explanation was complete, the teacher often used some ‘confirmation questions’ to gauge if the learners were ‘clear’ on what was expected; learners could ask for further explanation and information. Thereafter, the learners were expected to follow these instructions while the teacher very often made the decisions regarding when to start, when to stop, and when to move on to a related or different task.

The following extract is from a teacher (Erika) while she acted in a teacher-directed way during a lesson. In this extract, she worked with an S1 (age 12-13 years) class in their second lesson of a Scottish Country Dancing unit:

The boys and girls are brought together momentarily and are asked to sit on the floor so Erika can explain the focus and intentions of the lesson. The class will work on a Scottish Dance called ‘The Gay Gordons’. To start the dance lesson, Erika asks the boys and girls to ‘line up’ separately along the length of the assembly hall. This arrangement has the boys standing side-by-side in one stretched out line and the girls standing immediately in front of the boys in a similar side-by-side formation. Erika stands in the middle of the hall and explains that the focus of the warm up will be the ‘skip change of step’. This step sequence will be used to travel across the width of the hall with the girls’ line working at the same time, followed by a boys’ line working at the same time. Erika demonstrates what this step pattern should look like in front of the whole class and continually repeats the phrase ‘right, right, left, left’ to indicate the stepping sequence of her feet as she performs it. After this demonstration, the class are asked if they ‘understand’ and then they start to perform back and forth in these two lines. The step sequence is rehearsed for several minutes. Erika offers

several pointers to the whole class in relation to working on the balls of the feet and taking short, sharp steps.

***Teacher-guided practice: ‘setting up’ situations***

The form of teacher-guided practice presented in this section was common across all the participants’ teaching repertoires. Teacher-guided practice generally involved the teacher ‘setting up’ situations in which the learners have to formulate some kind of response. In ‘setting up’ a situation, the teacher initially engaged in some explanation and discussion to make clear the boundaries of the task. For the most part, the whole class or a smaller sub-group of learners listened to the opening explanation(s) from the teacher. The teachers’ use of questioning was a key part of setting up these situations; the teacher used questions that had a range of possible solutions or where the learners had to apply their knowledge to solve a problem within the situation. After a situation had been ‘set up’ by the teacher, the expectation was for learners to work as an individual or as part of a group to formulate a verbal or movement-related response.

For example, this extract shows a teacher (Seymour) working with an S3 athletics class in an open-ended situation where the class had to share ideas and experiment to formulate a response:

Seymour explains that the girls should ‘stay in the same [relay running] order’ so that they can ‘practice handing over the [relay] baton’ and ‘...aim to get this thing [the baton] round the track as fast as possible’. He lets the girls know: ‘first come up with a way of practising the relay change over in the space [a long thin section of the games hall]...running, recovery, and taking-off. Come up with a way to solve the organisational problem. How you can organise the group and the space’ so you can change-over the baton at full speed.



Seymour circulates round the class and listens to some of the discussions, but makes limited comments unless asked a direct question. The learners at one group set up a long circuit of cones where they would run up one side doing change overs, pass round the cone at the top end and start to run down the other side. The learners completed several practice runs where they could continually change over the relay baton. After practising for a few minutes the group stop and they start to slowly gather together.

**Amber:** ‘Did that work?’ Another learner, Redina, provides some comments for improvement.

**Redina:** ‘...it’s too short [points her hands to one side of the circuit then the other]...the distance at the ends is too short’ to get back up to full speed for the change-over immediately after the bend. Seymour arrives at this group as the learners are having this discussion. He listens to Redina’s explanation.

**Seymour:** ‘What do you have to do [after listening to Redina explaining]?’ The learners suggest a few things like having fewer people performing at a time and changing the layout of the cones. Seymour listens to these suggestions and then moves off to another group as the girls continue to share ideas.

### ***Learner-led practice: the learners ‘taking on responsibility’***

Analysis of observation data revealed that learner-led practice was a way in which four teachers worked with their classes. Learner-led practice generally involved learners ‘taking on responsibility’ for leading in a range of different ways during a class. The learners were considered to be ‘leading’ in a class when they were designated by the teacher to be a leader or the teacher specifically requested that a learner or group of learners take charge for a section(s) of a lesson. In general, the learners were supported in their performance of these

leadership roles in the following ways: the teacher presented information or resources to the class; the learners recalled information from a previous lesson or series of lessons; the learners had time to plan ideas and liaise with the teacher in advance of a lesson. For the most part, teachers provided support to the learners taking on various forms of responsibility and, at times, this role demanded that the teacher had to respond to changing situations.

The following passage is taken from an S2 (age 13-14 years) mixed dance lesson where one learner led a task with the whole class. The teacher - Jessie - gathers the learners in briefly to set the scene at the start of the class before a learner called Ralph leads an extended section of the lesson.

**Jessie:** ‘Once Ralph has done about 10-15 minutes of dance today we’ll get into the same groups as last week and design a movement sequence with at least three movements...must include unison...cannon...levels...OK Ralph, over to you!’

Ralph quickly gets to his feet and steps behind the curtain to the music player. The class get to their feet and position themselves into two lines. A fast-paced, contemporary song starts to play loudly. Ralph appears from behind the curtain and jumps to a spot in front of the class. As soon as he lands, he is facing towards the class and immediately starts to perform a series of linked movements in time with the music. The rest of the class follow along as best as possible. The more able learners seem to be able to keep up with Ralph and have arranged themselves in the front row. The less able learners – who seem to be slightly out of time with Ralph’s pace and verbal commands – are arranged towards the back of the class. The song is played a few times through and the same moves are rehearsed with Ralph taking the lead at the front. Jessie joins in with the learners in back row during the repeat performances and completes the whole routine.

In this example, Ralph was requested by Jessie to take on a leadership role. Ralph, a keen dancer, has choreographed this routine at home. Despite Jessie's minimal input to support the learner-led efforts in this extract, she has already liaised with Ralph in advance of the lesson to ensure the material he presents is appropriate for the learners.

***Teacher-learner negotiated practice: finding the 'middle ground'***

Working in a teacher-learner negotiated way was an integral part of three teachers' practices. Teacher-learner negotiated practice generally involved the teacher and the learners finding the 'middle ground' regarding the way ahead at various transition points in a lesson or series of lessons. These transition points could include: the start of a new unit of work; the start of a specific lesson; during a specific lesson; and at the end of a lesson or unit of work. In finding the middle ground, open discussion and debate helped to reach a compromise between the teacher and learners. Most often, the teacher instigated these discussions and debates and, in the early stages of these exchanges, there was much use of explanation and questioning to start a form of dialogue. By initiating a class debate in this way before, during, or after a lesson or unit of work, the teacher could elicit responses and suggestions from the learners. As part of this dialogue, there was an opportunity for the learners to suggest future directions and the specific focus for class content.

In the following example, Gaynor works with an S3 class that have recently finished an extended unit of creative dance. This class are at the start of a new unit of work and badminton and gymnastics are used simultaneously in the lesson. I select exchanges from the closing stages of this lesson to exemplify several features of teacher-learner negotiated practice. In particular, note the way in which there is discussion and debate between the teacher and learners together with the potential use of learners' reflection on their experiences to inform their dialogue with the teacher:

Gaynor is positioned at the entrance to the equipment cupboard and there is only the tall box to be put away and a gymnastics mat. Gaynor calls the girls over and they make their way towards her and gather tightly around the tall box. Gaynor leans on the box with her elbows and her forearms are resting on the top. Gaynor says ‘So girls we can stay with the same format next week [using badminton and gymnastics simultaneously in a lesson] for the Wednesday and the Friday....you suggested [earlier in the week] that you might be interested in dodgeball, basketball, and indoor rounders<sup>2</sup>’. One learner gasps loudly at the indoor rounders suggestion. Gaynor responds that it may be dodgeball that is the preferred option. Many of the girls respond with a ‘yeah’ and this would be the preferred activity and one learner offers a low level explanation as to why this is the case. The conversation continues back and forth for a few minutes more and finishes with Gaynor offering a reminder that ‘Alright so dodgeball next Wednesday’ and an indication that more negotiation may be ahead at the end of the next class as ‘we can see if we’ll keep that [dodgeball] for the Friday’.

***Learner-initiated practice: using ‘improvised moments’***

Learner-initiated practice was observed during the lessons of three teachers. This form of practice generally involved the teacher *using* ‘improvised moments’ in a lesson. In terms of the teacher *using* improvised moments, this involved the way she or he can respond to, and be attentive of, changing situations in a lesson. These are the moments where a learner or group of learners asks a question, responds to a teacher’s question or statement, suggests something they would like to do or continue doing, or raises an idea that is picked up by the teacher and this forms a major focus of a lesson. In other words, these are the spontaneous, ad hoc moments where a suggestion emerges from a learner(s) and then the teacher allows this to influence the direction of the lesson.

For example, as Jessie worked with an S3 athletics class she used an improvised moment that emerged from the learners and then responded by making sprint starts and sprint technique the focus of the lesson.

Jessie let me know that she was moving back over to the timed sprint group and explained that this group would be working to complete a few more 100 metre sprints in the remaining time left before the end of the period. I decide to stay with a group working on a distance running task. However, as soon as Jessie arrived at these learners, I could see she was working with them on something other than the 100 metre sprint. These learners completed no more timed 100 metre sprints. Instead, they were now working across the track over a shorter distance; I could see Jessie continually speaking to these learners as they worked across the track. I quickly approached Jessie as she was working with this group. I was interested in that Jessie was not necessarily working with the learners on what she intended to do only a few minutes previously i.e., more 100 metre sprints. As soon as I arrived, Jessie immediately came to chat with me as the learners continued to work on their sprinting in the background. Jessie immediately informs me that, ‘the girls wanted to work a bit more on their starts and a bit more on their sprinting technique’.

### **Future directions**

Based on these findings, it can be argued that existing research literature has presented an insufficient account of teachers’ practices. The range of interaction patterns that this study has revealed, and the underpinning influence of teacher-learner relationships, appears to be at odds with the accounts reported in the research literature. However, before turning to highlight the implications of this ‘mismatch’, it seems important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. My decision to include six participants was crucial to ensure I could capture a fine-grained account of each teacher’s practice, but this small sample size has restricted my study from making any bold claims about teaching in Scotland or other national

contexts. Further, my decision to recruit highly competent teachers has also restricted this study from making sweeping generalisations about practice. It is quite possible that these highly competent teachers have a broader repertoire of teaching approaches, and a different approach to the decisions they make about their practice, in comparison to teachers with lower competency levels. However, while we must apply considerable caution in generalising these findings, I would argue there is much value in this study for future researchers, teacher educators, and student teachers.

Looking first at future researchers, it is striking to note that learner-led practice was a major part of four teachers' practices. These findings contrast markedly with existing literature reporting teachers' overuse of 'direct' teaching approaches. My research revealed that there are teachers (albeit highly competent ones in this case) capable of working beyond the realms of 'direct' teaching, yet I was unable to find research studies in the literature documenting learner-led approaches in *naturally* occurring situations. In fact, alongside teacher-directed and learner-led practices, this chapter noted that there were instances of teacher-guided, teacher-learner negotiated and learner-initiated practices. Recognising the middle ground between the teacher 'in charge' and learners 'taking on responsibility' via teacher-guided, teacher-learner negotiated, and learner-initiated practices, maps a crucial 'grey area' that exists between these two perspectives. Therefore, there is scope for future researchers to identify and track practitioners performing broad teaching repertoires not only to report novel practices that other teachers can pursue, but also to start building conceptions of teaching that transcend a deficit-based perspective.

Turning to teacher educators and student teachers, I suggest there is a requirement for both parties to critically appraise the research literature. With the teachers' practices in my study comprising three, four, or even five of these patterns of interaction, evidence suggests that these teachers have a broader teaching repertoire than is currently conveyed in the research

literature. Seeking out studies employing a range of theoretical perspectives, coupled with scrutiny of their methodological design, could help deepen awareness of school settings and guide the decisions teacher educators make about the preparation of students for school-based teaching placements. Likewise, developing an awareness of the limitations of the research literature, together with an appreciation of the realities of physical education classes via the study reported in this current chapter, could give student teachers a clear sense of the practices they will need to bring to life during school-based teaching placements (and beyond).

### **Summary of key findings**

- Teacher-learner relationships informed the decisions teachers made about their practice;
- Respect was at the ‘core’ of teacher-learner relationships;
- A mutual or shared form of respect provided scope for the learners to have a role, to a degree at least, in deciding what happens in classes;
- The teachers displayed a broad teaching repertoire;
- The following patterns of interaction comprised the repertoires of these teachers: teacher-directed practice; teacher-guided practice; learner-led practice; teacher-learner negotiated practice; learner-initiated practice.

### **Reflective tasks**

- Why should we be concerned with the conceptions of teaching presented in the literature?
- What are the challenges of capturing ‘real-world’ teaching?
- Is ‘real-world’ teaching distorted by the research literature?
- What is ‘naturalistic’ inquiry and how might this stance be a helpful (and limited) way to challenge existing conceptions of teachers’ practices in the literature?
- Is there a ‘mismatch’ between the literature and real-world’ teaching, and if so what are the implications for future researchers, teacher educators, and student teachers?

### **Further readings**

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<sup>1</sup> Readers with an interest in reviewing a comprehensive account of these teacher-learner relationships can refer to McMillan (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rounders is a striking and fielding activity with similarities to softball and baseball.